

# SOUNDS LIKE...

From Angklung to Zampoña, Roland's GR-20 Guitar Synthesizer offers a world of weird and wonderful sounds. While you reach for your musical dictionaries, musician and user Jim Kerr turns it on.

**T**he GR-20 Guitar Synthesizer is Roland's cost-effective answer to a problem that many string thrashers and twangers have in their playing careers. Guitars and basses, even when played through the plethora of effects pedals available, still produce sounds that identify them as coming from stringed instruments. But how many times have you, as a guitar or bass player, thought that a song would sound better with the subtle insertion of bowed strings or even brass?

While it has been possible to accomplish this apparent contradiction with stringed instruments, the available devices were generally complicated, horrendously expensive and often produced rather unconvincing sounds. So in the GR-20, Roland has come up with an absolute boon of a black box. As a package it doesn't reveal much at first glance. It's more than a wolf in sheep's clothing, even a Bengal tiger of a box – GR! (geddit?) – but, I must also emphasise, it can deliver sophistication when required.

## Seeking inspiration

If you can relate to my situation, then you might understand why I chose to get hold of a GR-20. I consider myself to be a reasonably accomplished bass player; I've been plucking, slapping and tickling the thick ones for some years now. My skills however are mainly string-based. I can play keyboards, but with just one finger. Two, if I concentrate hard. You could fairly conclude I'm keyboardically challenged. So I was faced with a dilemma. I wanted, or rather I was desperate for, new sources of inspiration, new digital-quality sounds to improve and develop my songwriting. How to get round this little problem? A keyboard-based synth was a no-no but, as luck would have it, I saw a magazine with the description of the Roland GR-20 Guitar Synthesizer. "This looks like the boy for me," I said to myself.

I often thought when creating my songs that a smidgen of strings, a burst of brass or a clip of kayakeum (don't ask me) here or there might sound nifty. Problem was, I had difficulty finding a sufficiently talented musician or group that would fit into my studio. Oh and yes, would they mind playing for free?



Not usually. The GR-20's product bumpf stated it could deliver those sounds and loads more. So I got a hold of one. With the enormous range of digital-quality sound it claimed to produce, I feared the delivery of a monster pedal, but when it arrived it wasn't on a pallet so I feared my postman had made a mistake.

Upon opening the box I was confronted with a surprise. It was smaller than I'd anticipated and immediately looked as if it would be a doddle to use. It was also obviously a Roland product, well designed and robust. It was black with seven knobs, nine push buttons; two footswitch buttons, an integral foot pedal and a divided pickup plus the control module. And a manual, of course. Evidence of how simple a device is to use can usually be seen from the size of its manual. The manual for the GR-20 is barely 50 pages long and more than half of that describes the technical detail.

## Fits like a dream

Like a good number of musicians I'm a bit lazy, so I really did have serious concerns about fitting the pickups to my guitar and bass. Indeed, I promised myself, if it was chore at all, the thing would go back on the boomerang post. But on my 'fiddliness' scale of nought to ten, I found that fitting the pickup lies at about 2.5. All I did was quickly read the short guide, check all the bits were there and I was off.

There are a variety of ways of fitting the pickup and the controller but clear instructions are given. I opted for the fairly permanent fit, which entailed drilling a few small holes in the guitar body. Before you all collapse into a catatonic trance, there are other, non-invasive options available to fit the device to your antique or customised jewels. I fitted a GK-3 divided pickup to my Strat copy and a GK-3B to a five string bass in less than 20 minutes. Incidentally, the GK-3B suits all basses up to a six-string finger-killer. Another few minutes setting the input sensitivity for each instrument and I was done. Fitting the pickups without drilling would take less time, methinks.

I tend to give a new device a quick try without

reading the manual, mainly because I'm too lazy to read them, but also as a test to see how easy it is to use the device. Before I knew it I was playing my modified five-string bass and flooding the studio with honky-tonk piano, male 'aahs', a brass section with baritone sax and a didgeridoo and ocarina. Don't get me wrong, there are some exotic sounds in the machine

which perhaps would not sit comfortably in certain songs. A didgeridoo is one example of such an exotic but it's reassuring to know that if you spawn a song that needs a didgeridoo it's in the box.

## Sound choice

The range of sounds in each of the ten main banks is incredible. The sounds are all

digital quality, full and clean and can be tweaked whichever way takes your fancy. The system is also polyphonic: yes, you can play chords. In fact, it can play more notes at one time than you have fingers. Different sounds can be selected via either the guitar-fixed controller or the floor unit. Sounds can be played independently or mixed with the normal volume output of the guitar – nice. If you are playing in a live environment you can play bass as normal and noiselessly switch to a bass synth mix or synth on its own. Talk about flexibility. The effects I have achieved with this device and my BR-1600 are superb. I can play just about any imaginable instrument, or in many cases, an orchestra, on my bass or guitar alone. You're also able to take the sounds and customise them to suit, then store them. I have a close friend who is a keyboard player and he hasn't spoken to me since my GR-20 arrived. That's something to watch out for if your mates are musicians. The GR-20 also has a hold button which, once depressed, will sound single notes continuously, like a drone note.

I found myself looking down at the device on more than one occasion and thinking, how does this rather inconspicuous piece of

hardware produce so much? I would also like to bet any money that more than 95% of punters who buy this device do exactly what I did and try out every single sound the first time they use it. That amounts to 512 sounds and together they take rather a long time.

I've heard some criticism of the GR-20, which tends to focus on its alleged inability to track accurately in some situations. I must right what I think is a wrong here. After setting up the input sensitivities and the 'Play Feel', which determines how the synth responds to your picking dynamics, I did note in certain sounds the device fails to track 100%. But, and this is a big but, what has to be understood is that I found that the tracking goes astray only if the triggering instrument is played in a manner which is inappropriate for the type of sound. Some of the sounds are so full and detailed (and have long attacks, etc) that they are not meant to be played quickly. Select a full orchestra sound, then play at the speed of a Hendrix dervish and you will get a mush.

## Mind your eyeballs

In conclusion, I would like to offer some advice and give a sound warning to you all. Playing your instrument through this device will tend to make your eyeballs pop out of their sockets and you will attract incredulous looks from all who are listening. I am constantly amazed at the ability of a stringed instrument

to produce non string-based sounds. My enthusiasm for recording has been boosted by a small black box and there is no excuse for further boring my family and mates. Indeed, the problem now is, how to use the device sensibly so as not to swamp my songs. What a dilemma. Expect loads of pop-ins from people who hear it and can't believe you haven't invited a classical or ethnic master as a session guest.

So, were you able to identify the angklung and the zampoña? If not, I'll tell you now. The angklung is a tuned bamboo slide rattle used across south-east Asia, while the zampoña is an aerophone made of different lengths of reed (like panpipes). So now you know. ■



GK3-B: will span six bass strings

